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**ZHOU ENLAI AND THE OPENING TO THE WEST**

Fundamentals of Statecraft  
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Course 5601

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## Introduction

The February 1972 agreement between Chinese Communist Party leader Mao Zedong and United States (US) President Richard Nixon to normalize diplomatic relations fundamentally and dramatically altered the nature of US-Sino relations and strategically changed the nature of China's role in the community of nations. The skillful, painstaking and at times brilliant diplomatic work of Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai resulting in the opening to the West was perhaps Zhou's most remarkable diplomatic achievement in a career marked by many diplomatic coups spanning more than twenty years. The opening to the West laid the groundwork for China to reenter the international world order after a period of intense isolation and it established the basis for China to be taken seriously as a player on the international scene. It was Zhou's finest hour.

## Zhou's Grand Strategy

Both Henry Kissinger and Ronald C. Keith, in their discussions of Zhou's strategic vision and ideological framework advance separate theses on the driving motivation and prisms through which Zhou viewed the world and defined China's national interest(s). Kissinger speaks forcefully of understanding Zhou's strategy through a "balance of power" vision which infused Zhou's engagement with Kissinger in the period when China was attempting to reenter the world scene.<sup>1</sup> Keith speaks of Zhou's self-definition as a 'realist, but only in 'Chinese Marxist-Leninist terms' and how an important part of his

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<sup>1</sup> Kissinger commented that "the Chinese leaders were the most unsentimental practitioners of balance-of-power politics I have ever encountered." Henry Kissinger, The White House Years (Boston: Little Brown) pp. 1087-1088. Kissinger actually wants to play his analysis two ways for he also describes the Chinese leaders up as "deeply ideological, close to fanatic in the intensity of their beliefs." This latter statement could tend to undercut the validity of his statement that they were balance-of-power adherents. Ronald C. Keith, The Diplomacy of Zhou Enlai (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989) p. 12.

"realism" rested upon the foundations of an "ideological understanding of "workstyle" and united front "strategies and policies " <sup>2</sup>

This paper suggests that classic European balance-of-power or ideologically driven visions<sup>3</sup> modeled after Chinese revolutionary thought do not fully explain Zhou's strategy in managing China's approach to the West. A balance-of-power strategy may be a construct to explain the one significant result of the negotiations--China building an alliance with the US against the Soviet Union--but it does not explain Chou's grand strategy. Chou's statecraft was not driven simply by a desire to create a new power balance against Moscow. Rather, Zhou's strategy was to attempt to reintegrate China in the international system by normalizing relations with the Western superpower on conditions which were acceptable to Chinese political interests at a time when China's leadership was fractured and the nation in disarray. Zhou's strategy reveals that he was a daring practitioner of realist diplomacy who viewed negotiating with the West as the means to achieve some measure of domestic stability and the re-establishment of China's economic well-being (Mao had also given Zhou responsibility for running the economy) after a period of tremendous internal turbulence which brought China to the brink of social dislocation and disaster.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, Zhou stated Chinese foreign policy would be based on the principles of "independence", "sovereign equality", and "self-reliance," thus maintaining China's desire to remain independent from a strict power bloc arrangement.

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<sup>2</sup> Ronald C. Keith *ibid.* p. 181

<sup>3</sup> Keith states for Zhou ideology was not just a facade. It was the intellectual source for Zhou's personal workstyle. Zhou's realism was a matter of formal ideological conception which drew on the practical experience of united front politics. *ibid.* p. 208

<sup>4</sup> Edwin P. Hoyt argues that by the middle of 1968 so much destruction had occurred, and the threat of total civil war was so great that Mao Zedong relied on the People's Liberation Army, the only element in China that still had any central control, to restore order. Edwin P. Hoyt, *The Rise of the Chinese Republic* (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company, 1989) p. 29.

### Defining National Interests

Any nation-state's most basic and fundamental self or national interest must be the physical survival of the state. All other ways to define national interest--international power projection, international prestige, international economic control, regional influence--and the strategies used to advance them--are predicated upon the integrity of the nation state. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Chinese state apparatus was threatened by the ravages of the Cultural Revolution and Mao was under attack by radicals within his own Party who threatened his leadership (and by extension Zhou's)<sup>5</sup> who urged even greater revolution. Zhou viewed China, as a result of the Cultural Revolution, internally weak, socially dislocated with deeply fragmented leadership and weakened political institutions. Zhou's advocacy of reintegration into the international system and his diplomatic activism closely meshed with Zhou's efforts to rebuild China's party and state institutions and economy severely damaged in the Cultural Revolution.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, I would argue that in analyzing the relative importance of the international and domestic environments' impact on the way in which Zhou defined China's national interest in this timeframe, Zhou viewed these interests primarily in terms of a stabilization of the internal domestic political situation. By projecting outward and initiating an

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<sup>5</sup> In the late 1960s Zhou had been denounced by more radical elements with the party structure as a rightist and was unable to stop the destruction of the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

<sup>6</sup> Kissinger's focus on balance-of-power theories to explain Zhou's behavior and his explanation of almost solely external factors which drove Zhou to deal with Washington do not take into consideration the carrots involved in the negotiations. Neither Kissinger nor Keith mention that as Kissinger traveled to Peking to negotiate with Zhou in July 1971 the (n)egotiations were aided by decisions of the treasury and other departments to end the ban on the transfer of US dollars to China--Chinese-Americans could now send money to relatives on the mainland--to allow American owned ships under foreign flags to transport goods to China and to allow Chinese exports into the US for the first time since the Korean War. Jonathan D. Spence The Search for Modern China (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990) p. 630. Spence also explains quite clearly that Mao and Zhou were under pressure from influential segments of the (remaining) economic elements in China to exploit US technological resources to restart China's development, principally the oil industry.

overture to the West, Zhou was not only signaling to the West that the chaos was ending,<sup>7</sup> but was sending a message both to a severely damaged party and bureaucratic structure that Mao would not continue to impose an internal gag order on its political institutions. In addition, Zhou was signaling to Mao's political rivals (which included his wife) that he was changing the course of domestic policy and the excesses of the Cultural Revolution had to end. There is little coincidence that the negotiations with Kissinger came on the heels of China's admittance to the UN in the early 1970s and that after normalization of relations with the United States, China normalized relations with Japan. Zhou realized that China needed to anchor itself in the western international structure to stabilize its internal situation.

### The Role of Ideology

I have stated that revolutionary ideology infusing China's attempts to advance its interests on the world stage or pure balance of power concerns do not sufficiently explain why China boldly reached out to normalize relations with the United States. Admittedly, internal political necessity compelled Zhou to craft his diplomatic rhetoric within a Marxist-Leninist ideological framework and to explain his strategy in ideological terms. I would argue communist regimes 'talk' and "negotiate" in ideological and Marxist-Leninist terms, in part as a way to legitimize their regimes. Therefore it becomes easy to ascribe ideological rationales for what may in truth be pragmatic and realist based decisions. As Zhou observed to Kissinger, the US should observe Peking's actions not its rhetoric: the anti-American propaganda was "firing an empty cannon."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> After Zhou described the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, Kissinger comments: "(I)n retrospect I count that Zhou would have raised the point if he had. He not wanted to dissociate himself from the Cultural Revolution at least to some extent and to indicate that it was over." Kissinger, *ibid.* p. 75-76.

<sup>8</sup> Kissinger, *ibid.* p. 77-8.

If, as Keith argues, revolutionary ideology had informed Zhou's vision of the international political situation, the geopolitical context, as well as provided some type of plan of action for China's relations in the international arena, then it is difficult to understand Beijing's timing to reach out to the West. Why would a highly revolutionized communist regime reach out to an imperialist power which was playing heavily in Asian politics--and whose actions ran contrary to China's interests? At the time when China made its overture to Washington, the US continued to be engaged in a war against one of China's allies, North Vietnam, in May 1970 the US moved into Cambodia, in early 1971 the South Vietnamese began incursions into Laos, supported by the US and domestically the Pentagon Paper had been published, providing glaring details of inconsistencies in US foreign policy.

Again, it was China's internal situation which is the key to understanding the timing of the negotiations and Zhou's pragmatic and realist approach. Zhou's strategy was borne of political necessity. China's internal situation is the reason why Zhou rejected Nixon's framework of a five power balance-of-power economic system dominated by the US, Soviet Union, European Union, Japan and China. If Zhou were a classic balance of power purist, would not this intellectual framework have been appealing to him? Zhou was painfully cognizant that China was in no position to play a dominant role on the world scene. Zhou's rejection of Nixon's framework was less motivated from ideological objection than from a practical one--China had little to no internal power to project on such a scale outward. Zhou in fact was clear that he did not view China as a 'great power' and emphasized the importance of 'independence' and 'sovereign equality' to establish China's reluctance to join any greater power scheme.

One Man's Objective is Another Man's Opportunity and Other Man's Threat

Henry Kissinger argues that China's objective in reaching out to the West was to "enhance their country's international standing and undercut that of Taiwan" as well as being motivated "in part in response to the Soviet military threat along their borders"<sup>9</sup> I would argue that the issues of Soviet expansionism, the status of Taiwan as well as the strategic position of Japan in Asia were viewed both as threats and opportunities upon which Zhou believed he could negotiate with the United States. Zhou used geopolitical issues as the context of the negotiations--they were in essence the language of the negotiations. They were not the endgame. The endgame was normalization of external relations to stabilize the internal situation. The Shanghai Communique is distinguished by how much China and the United States disagreed on fundamental foreign policy issues. By understanding the domestic environment in which Zhou was operating politically, the commonly held objectives--advancing international influence, projecting international power based on ideological terms or constructing balance of power structures--carry much less weight as explanations of state behavior in this case.

Zhou correctly assessed that using the issue of containing Soviet expansionism was a great enticement for Nixon, and its focus as a point of the negotiations played into Nixon's Cold War framework as well as played in Zhou's favor. If by negotiating with the United States, the derivative effect was to counterbalance the Soviets, then China accrued an additional benefit in its drive to establish a position in the international system and to establish some measure of internal order out of chaos. Keith points out, I believe correctly, that Zhao's interpretation of the word hegemonism which Kissinger believes

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Kissinger ibid p 734-735

is a codeword for Soviet expansionism, was agreed to by Zhao exactly because its meaning is ambiguous and could be interpreted in a broader context, not necessarily targeted against the Soviet Union. In fact, in talks with North Vietnamese leader Pham Van Dong, Zhou likens US policy to a "strategem of aggression" which could be interpreted as Zhou's condemnation of US "hegemonism."

### Zhou's Strategy

We have learned that strategy "involves applying resources to achieve objectives." What then were Zhou's resources? At first glance, they would appear to be limited in nature and scope. China had neither the military nor economic might or apparent social cohesion to use as levers in its policy of approaching the West. It had deliberately waged war upon itself and had intentionally sought to isolate itself from the world. But Zhou had a more subtle resource--namely himself and an ability to project a powerful resource, yet at the same time a latent one, an image that China was emerging on the world scene and would act as a counterbalance for the United States against the Soviet Union. Zhou's most effective resource in negotiating first with Henry Kissinger and then with Richard Nixon was his consummate ability as a diplomat to negotiate conditions acceptable to China's internal concerns while appealing to the objectives of a heretofore opposing and hostile power.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Kissinger could not be more audacious than talking of Zhou's skill as a negotiator and his powerful presence as a statesman. Kissinger commented: Zhou Enlai in short was one of the two or three most impressive men I have ever met. Urbane, infinitely patient, extraordinarily intelligent, subtle, he moved through our discussions with an easy grace that penetrated to the essence of our new relationship as if there were no sensible alternative. I have already expressed my appreciation of Zhou's outstanding qualities. I have met no one else--with the exception of de Gaulle--with an equal grasp of world events. His know edge of detail was astonishing, but where many leaders use detail to avoid complexity, Zhou's solid and extraordinary grasp of the relationship of events. (pps 745-780-781)

Zhou's other great resource, which he appropriately assessed and manipulated, was an American President (and his national security advisor) who was a strategist not only willing to reach an accommodation with China, but who philosophically believed that such an arrangement served US national interests. It was Zhou's great fortune that both Kissinger and Nixon, master practitioners and faithful believers of balance-of-power politics, were not concerned with China's human rights record and did not base their foreign policy objectives on an idealist conception of international relations. Kissinger is remarkably silent on China's internal situation and does not dwell on the internal chaos which had convulsed China. Zhou successfully gauged that a diplomatic strategy of appealing to Nixon's key priority--stopping Soviet expansionism--would provide fertile ground upon which to negotiate a normalization of relations.

#### Lessons from Zhou's Statecraft

There are four key lessons in the statecraft of Zhou En-lai for present day US foreign policy practitioners. The first critical lesson is that nation states who have vastly different ideological visions of governance--both domestic and international--who appear to share no common elements and who in fact may be in competition with each other in some arenas can still successfully negotiate for mutually beneficial aims if there are positive ends for both. Those ends may be different, and may even be contradictory, but if there is some overlap where both sides believe the gain is more important than the cost, negotiation is possible. The second key lesson is that the importance of the individual statesman can never be underestimated. Zhou En-lai is perhaps one of the greatest examples of a statesman who negotiated from a tremendous position of weakness<sup>11</sup>, yet

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<sup>11</sup> Harrison E. Salisbury provides a graphic example of just how weak Zhou's diplomatic cards were while he was negotiating with Kissinger. "No one in the American party and few in the world knew

overcame that weakness with skill, aplomb, personal prestige and a sense of mission<sup>12</sup>

The third critical lesson is that in foreign policy formation, a nation should never overlook the importance of the domestic dimensions of the other nation. Foreign policies may spring from domestic policies or they may be driven by domestic dynamics or they may be the means to achieve domestic ends, the two are remarkably intertwined and one has impact on the other. Zhou understood the importance of this symbiotic relationship. He needed external anchoring to stabilize the domestic situation. The fourth key lesson is that diplomacy in which individual statesmen engage in traditional means of discourse and use the tools of bargaining and negotiation remains an ever potent and considerable "weapon" in our foreign policy arsenal. The greatness of Zhou's grand strategy in opening to the west demonstrates that the results of non-violent means of statecraft, at times, may be more enduring than objectives achieved through military victories.

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what Zhou knew--that Lin Biao had died in Mongolia the previous September--that Deng Xiaoping labored in a grimy machine shop in distant Jiangxi--that China had been turned into a wasteland, millions dead, population stunned, factories in cobwebs, schools a shambles. Only a handful knew that Mao Zedong had collapsed after the Lin Biao affair and lay cozing in bed or in a lounge chair, his heart and lungs unable to provide enough blood to his brain. --Harrison E. Salisbury, The New Emperors: China in the Era of Mao and Deng (New York: Avon Books, 1992) p. 306

<sup>12</sup> Kissinger spends a considerable amount of time discussing the theoretical discussions which he conducted with Zhou. I would contend that Zhou had very few tools to use--terms of concrete proposals to offer or to satisfy Washington and use all his power as a statesman to protect Kissinger's intellectual process.

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